

## Diversifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in American College Athletics: The Case for Adaptive (And Other Non-Traditional) Sports

[thesportjournal.org/article/diversifying-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-american-college-athletics-the-case-](https://thesportjournal.org/article/diversifying-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-american-college-athletics-the-case-)

U.S. Sports Academy

**Authors:** Kevin T. McGinniss, Ed.D. (Southern Connecticut State University), Demetri Goutos, B.A., M.B.A. (Yale University), and Yetsa A. Tuakli-Wosornu, M.D., M.P.H. (Yale University).

### **Corresponding author:**

Kevin T. McGinniss, EdD

Southern Connecticut State University

501 Crescent Street, New Haven, CT USA 06515

Campus Site: Office Building 1, 108G

Phone: 203-392-8837

Email: [mcginnissk1@southernct.edu](mailto:mcginnissk1@southernct.edu)

Kevin T. McGinniss, Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor, Graduate Coordinator, and Director of Sport Management at Southern Connecticut State University. Demetri Goutos, B.A., M.B.A., and Yetsa A. Tuakli-Wosornu, M.D., M.P.H. are members of an independent research lab at Yale University, dedicated to addressing inequities and unethical behavior in sport, while at the same time, using sport to address inequities and unethical behavior in society.

## **Diversifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in American College Athletics: The Case for Adaptive (And Other Non-Traditional) Sports**

### **ABSTRACT**

The popularization of adaptive sports on college campuses has incredible potential to affect real and meaningful change for students with disabilities across the country. Despite clear language promoting equality and fairness espoused by the NCAA and member universities, as well as legislation requiring equal opportunities for students with disabilities, early attempts to adopt inclusive sports strategies have all but evaporated. Another category of non-traditional sports programming, however, has taken off in recent years. eSports, or competitive video games, has seen a meteoric rise in support, investment, and growth on the collegiate athletic scene, and show that when properly motivated the NCAA and

member institutions act with surprising conviction. With their proven ability to react and organize, and the need clearly defined, the NCAA must return its attention to increasing athletic opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities.

**Key words:** NCAA, eSports, disability, sports programming

## **INTRODUCTION**

Like all sports, adaptive college sports (e.g. sports for student-athletes with disabilities) have the potential to spark positive change by bringing people together for a common purpose, but these programs need meaningful support to succeed. Given the sea-change in American attitudes towards inequities in sport, there is no better time for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to rethink its approach to intercollegiate varsity (college-level) adaptive sports.

## **DISCUSSION**

America is getting better about addressing inequities in sport head-on. In June 2019, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) changed its name to the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), projecting a view that athletes with and without disabilities hold equal status. In the same month, the U.S. Women's soccer team toppled the world's best in spectacular fashion, while also using its platform to highlight pay disparities between male and female players. These disparities mirror age-old, gender-based pay gaps in the broader American (and global) workplace, and America seems to have had enough. While elite American athletes are learning how to equitably share spotlight, what is happening at the college level?

The USOPC Collegiate Advisory Council (USOPC CAC) recently recommended that the NCAA institute changes to improve the intercollegiate (college) experience for student-athletes who compete internationally. This includes Paralympic athletes, who for years may not have had support on campus, even while representing the U.S. on world stages. If enacted, these recommendations may be the first steps towards filling a gap in support for student-athletes with disabilities, and may highlight disparities these students face.

Adaptive sports offer visibility and a voice to a growing community of students with disabilities. Research confirms that a broad lack of awareness continues to prevent the full social inclusion and integration of students with disabilities at American universities(1). It also shows, promisingly, that awareness-raising efforts have had a significant impact (2). Despite high levels of participation at youth and professional levels, there is a comparative and concerning dearth of college-level competitive adaptive sports venues (with some notable exceptions, such as the recent efforts by the City University of New York (CUNY) to build a collegiate wheelchair basketball team).

So how do sports programs grow? Athletics departments and the NCAA each play significant

roles in the fate of any new program, deciding the program's status, stature, organizational structure, and degree of financial and programmatic support. In the past, the NCAA has had inconsistent interest in adaptive sports. A few years ago, in response to criticism that universities were failing to offer equal opportunities to students with disabilities required under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the NCAA attempted to create change. In 2015, the Eastern Collegiate Athletics Conference (ECAC) became the first NCAA-sanctioned conference to adopt a comprehensive inclusive sport strategy providing championship opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities in swimming, rowing, and track & field, as an outgrowth of the 2013 NCAA Think Tank on Student-Athletes with Disabilities. Despite early enthusiasm, the championships have not been continued and there are no concrete signs of future support for systematic inclusion of student-athletes with disabilities from the NCAA. Meanwhile, the ECAC appears to instead be putting a major focus on expanding into eSports, as have many intercollegiate athletics departments across the country.

While it can be difficult to build a non-traditional sports program, the support given to eSports (e.g. competitive video game playing) can serve as a precedent. College eSports has seen exponential growth in the last few years, first at the club level, and more recently as full-blown, university-sponsored varsity athletic programs, some offering scholarships. Universities are wholeheartedly supporting eSports development, and the NCAA spent years investigating the potential to bring it under its banner. This level of support demonstrates institutions can move quickly and decisively when motivated.

eSports allow institutions to honor the NCAA core value of creating an "inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes" within member institutions(3). They also position schools to earn a slice of the eSports industry, expected to exceed \$1 billion in market revenue this year. Universities are acutely aware of opportunities to gain the attention of prospective tuition-paying applicants.

Greed (and cynicism) aside, ensuring the financial viability of athletic programs and boosting application rates is an important role the NCAA and members *must* play. That said, it's not a zero sum game. Institutions can attend to the business of raising actual capital (through supporting eSports, for example), while raising the bar on social capital by making sure diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive—and acknowledge *all* non-traditional athletes. Implementing recommendations set forth by the USOPC CAC, and re-launching the conversation started by the ECAC about adaptive sports would be a good start. Taking another look at how to better and more formally support an ever-increasing number of students with disabilities through sports would give member universities who, at least in writing, laud the value of diversity a chance to explore these themes further.

All things considered, the case for expanding varsity intercollegiate competition opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities (mandated by law) is clear.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Berg, L.A., et al. (2017). Navigating the hidden curriculum of higher education for postsecondary students with intellectual disabilities. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(3). doi: 10.5014/ajot.2017.024703.
2. Denhart, H. (2008). Deconstructing barriers: Perceptions of students labeled with learning disabilities in higher education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(6), 483-497.
3. NCAA. (2017). NCAA inclusion statement. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/inclusion/ncaa-inclusion-statement>.